

1913 Seth Thomas Clock Still Ticking on old City Hall

By: Dale C. Maley
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The clock tower on Old City Hall in Fairbury has a fascinating history, which dates back over 130 years.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Fairbury experienced a long-standing feud between the West Enders and the East Enders. Early businesspeople wanted the business district in Fairbury to be located either on the West or East end of the village. As part of the feud, rival factions burned down buildings, resulting in many massive fires in this period.

In 1892, the village decided to build a City Hall at the southeast corner of Third and Locust Street. The city fathers insisted that the new structure be constructed of brick so that it would not suffer the same fate as many of the wood-framed buildings that were lost to the fires.

In 1996, Jack Tollensdorf researched the history of City Hall and submitted the application for it to be added to the National Register of Historic Places. In this application, Jack recounted that the building housed the Fire Department on the first floor as well as offices for city officials. Steel jail cells (which still exist today) were added to the southwest corner of the first story. The second story was designed to house City Council meetings and can only be accessed through a door on Third Street. There is no internal stairway connecting the first and second stories.

The initial building design featured a large clock that faced northwest, towards the Walton Bros. Department Store located on the northwest corner of Third and Locust Streets. This clock was located on the roof of the building, and a photograph still exists today of this configuration.

Isaac and his brother, John Walton, had the largest and most successful store in Fairbury during that era. Both Isaac and John Walton often donated some of their money to improve Fairbury. According to an August 7, 1902, Woodford County Journal article, Isaac Walton donated \$1,000 to establish an industrial arts department in the city schools. His donation of \$1,000 back in 1902 would be equivalent to \$36,817 in today's dollars. Isaac also bequeathed another \$1,000 for the same purpose when he died in 1913.

Lorenzo Beach Dominy was a wealthy banker and was the Mayor of Fairbury. Lorenzo and his wife Phoebe were devastated when their youngest daughter, Hazel, died quickly of typhoid fever just two months before her seventeenth birthday. They decided to build a library in Fairbury in Hazel's memory at the southeast corner of Third and Walnut streets.

Just one year after daughter Hazel's death, Lorenzo Dominy died in 1902. He died before the construction of the new library was started. Phoebe Dominy was in mourning for the loss of her daughter, Hazel, and her husband, Lorenzo Dominy.

Shortly after Lorenzo Dominy's death, his wife heard that Isaac and John Walton were planning to build a new library in Fairbury. Phoebe Dominy accelerated her plans, and the Dominy Memorial Library was finished on June 12, 1905.

In early 1912, Isaac and John Walton decided to donate the funds necessary to build a four-sided clock tower, which would replace the simple clock on the roof. The clock mechanism was purchased from the Seth Thomas Clock Co. in Thomaston, Connecticut. The clock made by Seth Thomas for Fairbury had a serial number of 1768 and was completed at their Connecticut factory on August 30, 1912.

In 1913, the main clock assembly was installed in the clock tower. In 1954, the City of Fairbury spent \$188 to relocate the main clock assembly from inside the tower to the second floor of the building. The fee of \$188 back in 1954 would be equivalent to \$2,232 in today's dollars. The 1954 restoration work was performed by Wallace Jaka, grandson of the clock's original maker.

The clock mechanism measures approximately three feet in width, two feet in depth, and four feet in height. The frame is painted green, and the mechanism sits on four legs. The clock is located on the north side of the second story of Old City Hall, and cables connect it to operate the four dials located in the clock tower.

In 1961, the clock quit operating. The City of Fairbury spent \$586 to have the hands replaced, the gears repaired or replaced, and the entire assembly synchronized. This repair amount of \$586 in 1961 would be equivalent to \$6,255 in today's dollars.

In 2003, after 90 years of service, the Seth Thomas clock quit running again. A city-wide fundraising effort successfully raised the \$10,000 needed to repair the clock. The restoration began in February and was completed in June of 2005. The mechanism was cleaned and repaired, the wooden hands were replaced with aluminum ones, and the four faces were given new glass covers. The clock tower itself was also restored. This \$10,000 repair done in 2005 would be equivalent to \$16,396 in today's dollars. The dedication of the refurbished clock was done during the 2005 Christmas Parade.

According to City of Fairbury Street Superintendent Lonnie Rhoads, the old clock still requires regular maintenance. Once a year, city personnel lubricate all the gears and moving elements of the clock. Twice a year, city personnel must change the time for Daylight Saving Time. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the weights that ring the bell must be repositioned.

Fairbury citizens are fond of seeing the old clock faces and hearing the bell ringing. Many citizens who grew up in Fairbury recall that when they were children and the bells rang, they were expected to return home to either eat their evening meal or go to bed.



Seth Thomas clock sitting on the second story floor of Old City Hall.



Nameplate of Seth Thomas clock made on August 30, 1912, in Thomaston, Connecticut.

